

Portfolio

Section 1

A catalytic leader within the early years can be defined as somebody who is able to encourage and initiate positive and appropriate changes within settings and work environments (McDowall Clark, 2012). This is supported by Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2013), who further adds that effective leaders and the quality of leadership has a constructive impact on children, their wellbeing and development in early years education. Catalytic leadership is important in the early years as it encourages positive engagement and outcomes for children, and also supports early years staff in working together towards common goals (Stamopoulos and Barblett, 2020).

Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2013) explains that catalytic and effective leaders in the early years are motivational, create mutual goals and are trusted by their colleagues. They further add that motivational leaders are the type of people that can create an environment where all staff and colleagues can work together to the best of their ability – because they want to do so rather than feeling as though they have too.

However, McDowall Clark (2012) suggests that early years practitioners can often be unsure of their roles as leaders within settings due to the assumption of what a catalytic leader looks like. For example, practitioners sometimes believe that leaders are persons of power, authoritative, or they hold exclusive job titles such as ‘managers’, ‘supervisors’ or ‘headmaster/headmistress’ (American School of Education, 2019). Mason (2020) agrees with the above ideas and demonstrates that colleagues in working environments often feel as though they do not have as much of a voice or the power to initiate ideas of change, because they do not have a leadership ‘title’ or ‘role’ within their workplace.

In contrast, Murray and McDowall Clark (2013) challenges McDowall Clark (2012) and Mason’s (2020) suggestion, as they indicate that anybody can be a catalytic leader and that somebody does not have to hold a specific job title or role to be one. Reed and Canning (2012) supports this by stating that catalytic leadership does not come from the top of a hierarchical system, or from someone who is leading from the front, it can come from anyone and anywhere, whether this is a child, someone who comes from poverty or someone in a position of power.

To support the ideas of Reed and Canning (2012), Ella Baker is one example of history's most prominent catalytic leaders, who believed in and fought for human rights, civil rights and social justice (Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, No Date). She stated during a civil rights speech in 1969, that leaders should begin by narrowing down and gain understanding of the root cause to a problem. Only then, can leaders become a catalyst, pushing for change by 'giving light and people will find the way' (Grant, 1998 supported by Abolition Notes, 2023). Gandolfi and Mills (2022) agrees and suggests social justice should be upheld by early years leaders by working in unison with other colleagues, creating ideas and pushing forward changes together to ensure children can excel in their education and development.

However, Nicholson *et al.* (2020) suggests that in today's classrooms and early years settings, social justice and equity is not something that is at the forefront of leadership content and theories. For example, they say that leadership is viewed as a complex process which is often socially constructed with traditional hierarchical concepts. Therefore, this challenges the view of Gandolfi and Mills (2022), Grant (1998) and Abolition Notes (2023) as it suggests current conflicting ideas of who can be a catalytic leader and what it takes to be one in today's society.

However, Blatt (2022) points out that there are many sociological issues that may challenge catalytic style leadership, prevent social justice and have an impact on children's lives. Factors such as bullying, poverty and adverse childhood experiences are all social issues that may challenge and influence the lives and education of children (Public Health Scotland, 2021).

Looking at poverty for example, Nuffield Foundation (2021) explains that different factors effect the level of poverty children experience. They add that this depends on things like where they live, household income and how many young children are in the family. Department for Work and Pensions (2021) supports Nuffield Foundation (2021) and shows poverty rates of families with 3 or more children was at 52% whereas families with 1 or 2 children was half of that at 26%. However, more recently Welsh Government (2022a) reviewed their Child Poverty Strategy agenda but has acknowledged the COVID-19 Pandemic has further impacted children living in poverty and their ability to retrieve accurate reviews and statistics on children living in Poverty in Wales.

As part of the Welsh Governments goal to reduce the impact of child poverty, free school meals for children were introduced, however they were only accessible for children who met certain criteria (Welsh Government, 2019). The Bevan Foundation (2018) states that this system is unreliable by explaining that a further 40% of children living in poverty would not be eligible for free school meals. As a result of this, the Welsh Government announced the roll out of universal free school meals for all primary school pupils, due to be completed by 2024 (Welsh Government, 2022b). This supports all families and children from all walks of life and creates an inclusive environment for them to be involved in (McAnnelly and Gaffney, 2019).

Therefore, looking this available information and knowing that there are many other sociological issues children and their families face, leaders in the early years – regardless of where they are located or their position of power – have more to do than educate children (Gove, 2013). They are there to support families, provide advice and refer them to services that can help. Also, they should provide children in settings a warm and welcoming environment, a sense of safety and basic needs such as food, shelter and care as pointed out in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Gove, 2013 and McLeod, 2023). By providing children with these resources, leaders are creating a catalytic movement for change, so children can be given the tools to be their best selves.

Being a catalytic leader is not an easy and straight forward role to undertake. As well as the heaviness of their roles and responsibilities, it requires a person to voice ideas for change and create new ideas within the work environment to help benefit all persons within the setting (Rodd, 2015) This sounds positive, however it can be difficult to create changes that all staff members agree with or want to get involved in and it can be tempting to avoid making difficult decisions (Carucci, 2018). Colleagues who have more years of experience in the setting may be reluctant to try new ideas and be resistance to re-training, thus causing conflict amongst fellow practitioners and leaders (CROW, 2018).

This coincides with a further challenge to catalytic leaders. For example, as previously mentioned, McDowall Clark (2012) explains that there is an underlying pre-conceived idea that leadership comes from authority figures rather than within and working together. To mitigate this and allow for people to view change as a positive movement,

continuous professional development opportunities should be provided for all practitioners to understand the importance of change and to build their knowledge on current professional ideas and theories (McDowall Clark, 2012 and Early Years Careers, 2017)

To conclude, catalytic leadership as termed by McDowall Clark (2012) is an influential factor in early years provision in leading change to benefit them, their families and early years practitioners. Anyone can be a catalytic leader (Reed and Canning, 2012), and therefore it is important to work together and bring all pedagogues ideas to the forefront of learning and support. By creating this work ethic and environment, the challenges faced by leaders can be tackled by the whole team to create an inviting and protective environment for both practitioners and children.

Section 2

The role of the Children's Commissioner for Wales is to analyse the effect of decisions and actions made by public and governmental organisations on children and their rights (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023a). Children's Rights in Wales (No Date) explains the Children's Commissioner in Wales was established in 2001, and further agrees with Children's Commissioner for Wales (2023a) by stating their role is to safeguard and protect the welfare of children and young people in Wales.

The current Children's Commissioner for Wales is Rocio Cifuentes, who replaced Sally Holland in April 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022c). Upholding children's rights is at the forefront of her role, as she aims to empower children and give them a voice. Her work will allow children to voice changes that they would like to see in their communities, all the while safeguarding them and their individual rights (Cifuentes, 2022). However, it should also be noted that in line with the *Care Standards Act 2000*, the Children's Commissioner for Wales also has the power to challenge and review the exercises of the Welsh Government if they have concerns in relation to the safeguarding and welfare for the children of Wales.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales has developed and worked on countless documents, frameworks and policies; however, this section will focus on The Right Way Framework which works in line with the *Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021*. This framework was developed from national research and surveys carried out with over 10,000 children in Wales, to create the Children's Commissioner for Wales's

3 year plan (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2019). Key findings of these research workshops showed that mental health was the most prominent issue amongst the young people and children population in Wales.

A possible contributing reason for this can be found in the national rights surveys that took place. They show that 42% (less than half!) of children in secondary schools felt as though they had the opportunity to take part in decision making, with only 19% of teachers able to state their school policies were linked to children's rights (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2019). This may suggest that children are not feeling like their opinions are valid which is contributing to the state of their mental health.

The Right Way Framework aims to encourage organisations and leaders of education to review and improve the services they provide to children and young adults regarding children's rights (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023b) alongside the 7 wellbeing goals set out by the Welsh Government (2022d). It was published in 2022 after the evidence review highlighted concerns as stated above, and aims to work alongside the new Successful Futures Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015) to support the 4 purposes and areas of learning and experience.

Furthermore, human rights are an underpinning theme that runs throughout Wales's current curriculum, encouraging leaders and children to 'learn about human rights, through human rights and for human rights' (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022). In addition to this, The Right Way Framework also acknowledges the need for children with learning difficulties in line with the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018)* to also have their rights voiced and considered. This supports the ideas of Shuelka (2018) by ensuring an inclusive education and life for children from all walks of life, also under the articles of UNCRC (Save the Children, 2019). Therefore, this shows a conscious effort from the Children's Commissioner and Welsh Government to support children's knowledge of human rights in education.

McLeod (2014) agrees with the ideas of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022) and Children's Commissioner for Wales (2023b), as they state allowing teachers to educate children through about human rights - even continuing the learning outside of the classroom - will create an understanding and peaceful pedagogy of education for both teachers, leaders and children in communities and societies.

However, a challenge to implementing a 'human rights' learning approach within education in Wales and the Right Way Framework is lack of understanding and knowledge from teacher perspectives. Cassidy, Brunner and Webster (2013) argue McLeod 's (2014) view, as they explain it is not as easy to implement the theme without preparation, research and training. Student teachers and current teaching staff feel unqualified or unprepared to engage in human rights education, let alone teach children about it. They further explain that it is important for practitioners to educate themselves through training on the matter, to help better equip themselves and the children they teach with the necessary knowledge to follow documents such as The Right Way Framework (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023b).

Another issue in implementing The Right Way Framework in Wales can be analysed through Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Ettekal and Mahoney (2017) explain this ecological systems theory as how human development and learning is influenced by differing environmental groups around the child. Zataari and Maalouf (2022) agrees but further adds it cannot be disregarded that children's wellbeing, development and sense of belonging is wholly affected by all aspects of this model. Therefore, in an ideal world it would be positive and politically correct to encourage children to practice and learn about their human rights. McLeod and Gleason (2023) support and suggest that factors outside of the bubble of the school environment (microsystems), such as extended families and communities (macrosystems) and their differing opinions and attitudes towards topics such as human rights, may challenge the implementation of the Right Way Framework of learning and development.

In addition, a further threat to maintaining our human rights and children's rights has recently come to light with the proposal of the Bill of Rights in 2022 by the UK Government (Welsh Government, 2022e). Proposed by Dominic Raab, the Secretary of State for Justice, it motions to replace *the Human Rights Act 1998* (Donald, 2022). This new bill puts forward several changes which will have a great impact on rights. For example, it will make it easier for the UK government to have the last word when taking action to deport asylum seekers and refugee's, creating a disregard for the safety of children and adults (Banjo, 2022). Furthermore, people will have to have evidence that their cases are 'serious' enough to be considered by the courts. This subtly removes the right to a voice for families and their children. Therefore, this Bill of Rights if passed, conflicts with the Children's Commissioners Right Way Framework

and the goal to install social justice and human rights approach to education (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022).

To conclude, the Right Way Framework set out by the Children's Commissioner for Wales is a constructive and favourable approach to supporting children to understand and use and access their individual rights (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022). However, it is clear that there are several barriers that may challenge the implementation of such framework alongside and under the new Successful Futures curriculum. As a result, this may make it more complicated for teaching staff and early years practitioners to carry out such an approach smoothly and to the best of their knowledge and ability. Therefore, due to the mixed views and ideas of adults, the most important goal of children accessing their rights may be compromised. This makes it even more important for practitioners to work together to lead and protect children's rights in settings (Early Education, 2021).

Section 3

Sam (2013) defines sociological issues as social factors within the environment of the child which may directly influence their lives, either positively or negatively. The American Psychological Association (2023) supports Sam (2013) by adding that these factors may relate to socioeconomic issues such as household income, or educational issues such as lack of access to learning services. The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022) agrees, as they explain such issues can raise negative effects on children's growth, development and their lives in entirety.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) is another sociological issue children face and can be defined as traumatic situations or encounters that children may be exposed to during their childhood (Whitters, 2021). According to Family Information Service Carmarthenshire (2023) these experiences vary in type, but consist of scenarios such as domestic violence, child abuse, parental separation, bereavement and alcohol or drug abuse – to name a few. As a result, children who encounter these traumatic experiences are more likely to have poorer development and life outcomes, and it is often children who are living in poverty or in deprived circumstances who are at higher risk of experiencing ACE's (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020). NHS (2023) agrees by stating ACEs have an impact on how children grow, on their current and future

mental health and their feelings also – sociological issues such as ACE's and the impact on children's lives go hand in hand.

However, Webster (2022) argues that currently, there is little research and evidence on the impact of exposure to ACE's in early childhood, therefore it may prove difficult to provide accurate and efficient interventions to support children and their differing needs. However, Public Health Wales (2015) found that in Wales, 47% of adults experienced at least 1 ACE in their childhood, with 14% experiencing 4 or more ACE's. Public Health Wales (2018) further challenges Webster's (2022) view by providing research and evidence showing that within the prisoner population in Wales, of the 46% who had served time in a Young Offenders Institute, 90% had suffered at least 1 ACE, with 60% suffering from 4 or more ACE's.

This suggests that there is growing evidence of the negative impact of ACE's on children and their development, but also where their lives and future may progress to as a result of these traumatic encounters. However, Welsh Government (2021) argues the above views and indicates that although experiences of ACE's are fairly common, the ACE Policy findings suggest that this does not always lead to poorer outcomes. They state that the correlation between ACEs and outcomes are 'associative rather than deterministic', therefore early years practitioners must be catalytic leaders by supporting children and families with early interventions so that they have the best opportunities to grow and be healthy in life, and ACE's can be prevented as much as possible (Social Care Wales, 2022).

Early interventions allow adults to provide and identify support and young children at higher risk of poorer life outcomes (Early Intervention Foundation, 2023). This aims to prevent problems progressing in a child's life, but also can prevent issues happening all together if identified early enough.

One early intervention to help support children with ACE's is Wales' Families First Programme. According to Welsh Government (2017a), Families First aims to build resilience and support children and their families for their individual specific needs by putting in place early interventions to set in motion prevention of issues such as ACE's, which will improve overall outcomes for children. This is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019), which outlines every right a child has by law, including the best interests of the child, protection from violence,

abuse and neglect, and the right to adequate standard of living (Save the Children, 2022).

Another early intervention service that helps mitigate the impacts of ACE's is Wales's Flying Start programme (Welsh Government, 2017b). Flying Start is available in Early Years settings across Wales to families with children under the age of 4. It provides access to free childcare, enhanced health checks and health visiting, family support services and parenting programmes (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, No Date). Welsh Government (2017b) supports this, but adds Flying Start is a multiagency team approach, helping to identify all the needs of the child and the family, providing tailored interventions which ensures children are flourishing and healthy. Therefore, offering Flying Start in disadvantaged areas where ACE's and other sociological factors are of a higher risk, will hopefully provide the relevant support to families and children to prevent ACE's from occurring.

However, there may be problems and challenges to delivering early intervention services such as Families First and Flying Start. For example, BASW (2015) suggests that funding varies from area to area. Although Wales has made early intervention a priority, there is unfortunately a lag between the beginning of investment of services and seeing the results and benefits. Action for Children (2021) supports BASW (2015) by adding that families struggle to access early intervention services such as Families First and Flying Start. For example, they found that 82% of parents found it difficult to access important services, with 78% admitting they were worried about the effect this may have on their children and family's future (Action for Children, 2021). This suggests that although early intervention services are law in Wales, more needs to be done to ensure it accessible for all families from all differing circumstances.

To conclude, research and evidence shows that early intervention services are vital in supporting vulnerable children and families in staying happy, healthy and developing successfully in the early years. However, without the funding and training from the government, these services may continue to be difficult to access for many struggling parents and children, allowing them to go under the radar and not receive the support and help they need.

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